Austin Mohn

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Honors Humanities

Untouchable Post I

Untouchable by Mulk Raj Anand

The introduction and majority of the beginning of the novel is spent explaining the caste system in India. The Indian caste system consists of 5 levels: Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warriors and landowners), Vaishya (merchants), Shudra (artisans and farmers), and Harijans (the Untouchables). Untouchables are believed by many in Indian to be so dirty that they are not fit to be merely touched by members of the higher castes. Bekha, a late-teens male Untouchable of a broken home, describes the troubles people of his caste face every day. Bekha himself he required to yell “sweeper, sweeper coming” as he walks down the street so no one will have the horror of touching him. His younger sister, who is the woman of the household since their mother’s passing, is not even allowed to draw water from the well herself because it is believed she would contaminate it if she did. The only hope Bekha’s family has in getting out of the Harijans caste is for Bekha’s sister to marry up in the hierarchy.

Thus far the novel has been very slow. The entire 250+ pages take place over only one day, so I’m not expecting the pace to pick up any time soon. However, the troubles the members of the Harijans caste face are certainly eye opening to the reader. I had learned in middle school a brief overview of the Indian caste system and was aware of the origins of the Untouchables name, but I was not aware of the severity of the discrimination they face.

While reading the beginning of this book I couldn’t stop thinking about how discrimination in clearly another human characteristic that spans time and culture. Though I don’t believe that humans seek to discriminate against each other intentionally, I do think humans like to associate with other humans similar to themselves; in turn, our natural confrontation takes over in our quest to be superior. Our strife for perfection allows us to subconsciously make it acceptable to keep others at the bottom so we can rise to the top. This concept displays itself even more in less developed areas of the world where equality is merely a strange Western idea.